FWIS 120: Fiction & Empathy
Spring 2017
MWF 1:00-1:50pm
Herzstein Hall 211

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Course Description

Is there a link between reading literary fiction and empathizing with others? Recent research seems to answer this question in the affirmative, but writers and readers have been making (and challenging) similar claims for almost as long as fiction has existed. In this course, we'll explore and debate the question ourselves by examining various works of fiction, as well as literary criticism on fiction and empathy. Along the way, we'll confront a number of questions: What does empathy actually mean? What's the difference between empathy and compassion? Can a work of fiction actually change the way we perceive others in real life? We'll analyze the work of 19th and 20th century fiction writers who are often praised for their ability to inhabit the consciousness of their characters, as well as contemporary authors who attempt to do the same thing in different ways. We'll also examine and debate what literary critics have claimed on this topic, focusing in particular on the elements of fiction and how those elements might provoke empathy. Over the course of semester, students will be able to come to develop their own conclusions about the link between fiction and empathy, while developing their skills as a readers, writers, presenters, and critical thinkers.

Content Learning Goals

By taking this course, students will be able to:

- Develop their own definition of empathy and explain the relationship between empathy and other related terms (i.e. compassion, understanding, sympathy, etc.)
- Respond logically and convincingly to cultural and scholarly debates about the link between reading literary fiction and moral or emotional intelligence
- Familiarize themselves with humanities research related to empathy and fiction
- Recognize and distinguish various forms of narration in fiction
- Distinguish and explain the techniques that fiction writers use to portray consciousness and understand the history behind some of these techniques
- Analyze and interpret the various ways that fictional works can shed light on human empathy, understanding, and compassion (or the absence of these qualities)
- Demonstrate an understanding of the elements that often distinguish fiction from other genres of writing
- Write their own work of short fiction, drawing directly on the examples and techniques we've examined throughout the semester

Communication Learning Goals
Although the central questions of this course will focus on empathy in fiction (and in life) the central goal of the course isn't to increase your knowledge about this topic; the central goal is to use this topic as a vehicle to help you build the essential reading, writing, critical thinking, and visual and oral communication skills you'll need in order to be successful in the rest of your academic career and beyond. By taking this course, students will:

- Enhance their understanding of the central place of writing and communication in the learning process and in academic life.
- Learn strategies for analyzing, synthesizing, and responding to college level readings.
- Improve their ability to communicate correctly and effectively in writing and in speech, taking into account audience and purpose.
- Become comfortable with writing as a process and learn strategies—for instance, prewriting, outlining, and revision—for working through that process.
- Learn appropriate use of the work of others, and, where necessary, specific practices of citation.
- Learn to articulate oral arguments and to respond productively to arguments of others in formal presentations and class discussions.

Assignments and Grading Percentages

Reading Responses	5%
Oral Presentations	5%
Summary	10%
Paper #1 (They say/I say argument)	15%
Paper #2 (close read for a general audience)	15%
Paper #3 (scholarly lit analysis w/ sources)	30%
Paper #4 (final reflection)	15%
Short Story	5%

Grading Scale

A+ = 100-98	A = 97-93	A- = 92-90
B+ = 89-88	B = 87-83	B- = 82-80
C+ = 79-78	C = 77-73	C- = 72-70
D+ = 69-68	D = 67-63	D- = 62-60
F = 59-0		

Note: I round up on grades of .5 or higher

Also note: Unlike many other Rice courses, FWIS courses are not eligible for the Pass/Fail option. Furthermore, FWIS courses may not be dropped after the second week of classes, except with special approval by the administration.

Course Materials
You will need to purchase the following books:

- Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*
- William Maxwell's *So Long, See You Tomorrow*

You are strongly encouraged to purchase the following book as well:

- Graff and Birkenstein's *They Say/I Say*, Norton, 3rd edition

The rest of the course readings will be available online or as PDFs on Canvas. You are required to bring each reading to class every day.

Reading Responses

Reading responses will take the form of a relatively brief and conversational letter to me and/or your classmates about the reading assignment. Reading Responses are due by **noon** on the day of class, though I recommend you complete them well in advance of that deadline. Late responses will not be accepted. I'll try to post each Reading Response assignment by 5pm of the previous class day. (Feel free to email me if you notice I haven't posted it by that time.) Reading responses are informal, low-stakes writing tasks meant to generate thought and conversation about our course readings. **All completed reading responses will receive a 100.** Reading responses that are incomplete—either because they don't meet all the requirements of the assignment or because they don't demonstrate that you read the entire text carefully—will receive a 50. At the end of the semester, **I drop your lowest two reading response grades.** One more important note: Reading Responses and all assignments for this course (including essays) are due by the required time and date whether you attend class or not.

Essay Submission and Grading

During the process of writing each essay, you'll be required to submit pre-writing and rough drafts online via Canvas. All rough drafts and prewriting will be due by noon on the required due date. At the end of the revision process for each essay, you will submit a final draft via Canvas. All final drafts must be submitted by the date and time listed on the course calendar, unless you and I have spoken and agreed in advance to an alternate submission time or date. (I'm fairly flexible about due dates with students who approach me about an alternate due well in advance of the scheduled due date.)

I'll typically return your graded essay during a one-on-one meeting outside of class, while you're working on your next paper. You'll have a chance to address my comments and revise/edit the essay to add up to half a letter grade (5 points) on that assignment. You will have this opportunity for all of your graded essays, and these revisions will be due at 5pm on the last day of finals. Students who failed to turn in process work/rough drafts for a particular assignment are not eligible to revise that assignment for a new grade. If you have submitted all your process work and plan to submit a rewrite, I strongly encourage you to meet with me outside of class at some point to discuss my comments on your essay and your plans for revising the essay.

Honor Code

One of the purposes of FWIS is to help new students understand the Rice Honor Code and, more explicitly, to teach students the rules of paraphrasing and scholarly attribution, and the appropriate uses of different types of evidence. Accordingly, FWIS instructors will take an educational approach to transgressions of these rules and respond to errors in these areas foremost as issues for grading and opportunities to correct errors, rather than as instances of academic dishonesty. At the same time, all FWIS instructors retain the authority to treat instances of repeat or egregious violations as matters for the attention of the Rice Honor Council.

In this course, students are expected to do the actual writing of their assignments on their own, with no outside help from anyone else. However, students are strongly encouraged (and will sometimes be required) to collaborate on all other aspects of their coursework; including discussing assignments, reading each other's work, and making suggestions for editing and revision.

Disabilities
Any student with a documented disability seeking academic adjustments or accommodations should speak with me during the first two weeks of class. All discussions will remain as confidential as possible. Additionally, students with disabilities will need to contact Disability Support Services in the Allen Center.

Absences
Attending each meeting of this course will be integral to your development as a writer and communicator. Class meetings will offer you a chance to develop and clarify ideas for papers, revise and edit your work, and receive feedback from your professor and your peers. **Students who miss more than 3 class meetings (except for official, documented participation in university events) may be docked 10 points—the equivalent of one letter grade—on their final average at my discretion.** With the exception of official university events and extreme, documented circumstances, there are no excused absences. Make sure you don't miss more than 3 days over the course of the semester.

Class Communication
I'll expect everyone, including myself, to be civil and attentive during class time. This means listening attentively and refraining (always) from using your phone during class or using your laptop for non-class activities. During class discussions, you should feel free to disagree with me or your classmates—disagreement is a valuable part of academic life—but please make sure to do so in a polite and respectful way. In the rare case that a student repeatedly fails to be civil or attentive, he or she will be asked to leave class, resulting in an absence. This same rule of polite, respectful, and attentive communication applies to your interactions with myself and your classmates online, both in Reading Responses and via email. If you email me, the email should be appropriate to the genre and audience (i.e. an email to your professor). This doesn't mean your emails have to be overly formal, but it does mean they shouldn't be written as if they were text messages to a friend. I'll try to respond to your email as soon as possible (during working hours), but if I don't respond, feel free to politely email me again. I get a lot of emails and sometimes, unfortunately, I let them slip through the cracks. This isn't a communication best practice. One last note: I'll communicate with the class as a group through Canvas and occasionally through your Rice email; make sure to check both of these daily.

Office Hours and Feedback
When you submit process rough drafts online, I'll read everyone's submission (or a sampling of the submissions, depending on how much time I have) and then offer general suggestions in class for areas that the class needs to address as a whole. If you want individual comments, you'll have a chance to meet with me to discuss your draft; these days are listed on the schedule and I'll provide a sign-up sheet outside of class. (You can contact to meet with me on other days as well, but these days are usually the ideal time for us to discuss your work). However, it's important to

note that, because of time constraints, I'll never be able to read your rough drafts as closely as I'll read your final draft when I'm grading it. Even if I provide comments on your drafts or look at your paper in a meeting, there are very likely still other areas that we haven't discussed that need to be addressed before the final draft.

One final note: You should always feel free to meet with me to discuss any of your grades, but in the case of major essays, please wait until at least 24 hours after I've returned the work, so that you have time to read and reflect on my comments and the grade.

CWOVC

You're encouraged to make appointments with the peer consultants at the Center for Written, Oral, and Visual Communication for our course assignments. These consultants **do not** proofread or edit your work, but they **will** provide feedback on topics such as the organization of your paper or presentation, the coherence of your argument, appropriate sentence structure, and consistent grammatical errors. The Center is located on the second floor mezzanine of the Fondren library, and you can make an appointment at the Center's website: cwovc.rice.edu. The Center is open every day and includes some evening hours. Bring a hard copy of your essay and your assignment to your appointment. You may also make an appointment to practice oral presentations and/or to have a consultant review your slides. Make use of these resources.

Course Calendar

Particular details on the following calendar may change as the semester goes on, depending on the circumstances of the course. However, if I alter anything, I'll notify you well ahead of time. Note, too, that you're expected to keep up with all assignments and readings, whether or not I remind you about the upcoming due dates during the previous class meeting. Readings and assignments listed on each date are to be completed BEFORE that day's class by the times specified above.

Course Calendar

Particular details on this calendar may change as the semester goes on, depending on the circumstances of the course. If I change anything, I'll notify you well ahead of time. Unless otherwise noted, though, you are required to complete all of the work mentioned below by the due dates listed.

Week One – An Introduction to Research and Debates on Fiction and Empathy
January 9: Syllabus review
January 11: Before class, read "Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind" (Kidd and Castano, *Science*) and submit diagnostic summary paragraph on Canvas
January 13: Before class, read "That Study on Literary Fiction and Empathy Proves Precisely Nothing" (Liberman, *Slate*) and submit RR

Week Two – Summarizing Research on Fiction and Empathy/Defining Empathy
January 16: MLK Holiday; no class
January 18: Read "Simplicity" and "Clutter" (Zinsser, *How to Write Well*) and "How Does Fiction Reading Influence Empathy?: An Experimental Investigation on the Role of Emotional Transportation" (Bal and Veltkamp, *PLOS One*) and submit graded summary

January 20: Before class, read "This is Water" (Wallace, Kenyon University Commencement Speech) and submit RR

Week Three – Critiquing Empathy and the Fiction/Empathy Connection
January 23: Before class, read "Against Empathy" (Bloom, *Boston Review*) and submit RR
January 25: Before class, read "Should Literature Be Useful?" (Siegel, *The New Yorker*) and submit RR
January 27: Before class, read "Shitty First Drafts" and "Perfectionism" (Lamott, *Bird by Bird*) and submit zero draft for Essay #1

Week Four – Empathy, Audience, and Revision/Editing
January 30: Before class, submit rough draft of Essay #1
February 1: No class; individual meetings and peer review
February 3: Before class, submit new, "dress rehearsal" draft of Essay #1

Week Five – Fiction, Consciousness, and Indirect Discourse
February 6: Submit final draft of essay #1; during class, read Kincaid's "Girl"
February 8: Before class, read Chekhov's "Rothschild's Fiddle" and submit RR
February 10: No class (Spring Recess)

Week Six – Omniscience, Empathy, and Third Person Narration
February 13: Before class, read Saunders's "Tenth of December" and submit RR; close reading presentation at the beginning of class
February 15: Before class, read Li's "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers" and submit RR; close reading presentation at the beginning of class
February 17: Before class, read Garcia Marquez's "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" and submit RR; close reading presentation at the beginning of class

Week Seven – Empathy and First Person Narration
February 20: No class; read Munro's "Night" and submit RR
February 22: Before class, read Packer's "Brownies" and submit RR; close reading presentation at the beginning of class
February 24: Before class, read Carver's "Cathedral" and submit RR; close reading presentation at the beginning of class

Week Eight - Close-Reading: What Does Fiction Do?
February 27: Submit rough draft of Paper #2
March 1: No class; bring rough draft to individual meetings and peer review
March 3: Continue to work on Paper #2

Week Nine: The Canon, Marginalized Voices, and the Novel
March 6: Submit final draft of Paper #2
March 8: Before class, read first half of Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* and submit RR
March 10: Before class, read the rest of *The House on Mango Street* and submit RR

March 13-17: Spring Break

Week Ten: Empathy and Attention
March 20: Before class, read the first 100 pages of Maxwell's *So Long, See You Tomorrow* and submit RR
March 22: Before class, read the rest of *So Long, See You Tomorrow* and submit RR
March 24: Prep for presentation #2

Week Eleven: Presenting on Scholarly Research about Cisneros/Maxwell and Empathy
March 27: Email me prep work for your presentation
March 29: Presentation #2
March 31: Presentation #2

Week Twelve: Responding to Critics/Scholarly Research
April 3: Submit rough draft of Paper #3
April 5: Continue to revise Paper #3
April 7: Continue to revise Paper #3

Week Thirteen: Quoting and Citation
April 10: No class; individual meetings and peer review
April 12: Continue to revise/edit Paper #3
April 14: Submit final draft of Paper #3

Week Fourteen: Fiction and Creative Nonfiction
April 17: Before class, read Saunders's "Thank You, Esther Forbes" and submit RR
April 19: No class; individual meetings and peer review
April 21: Final review and informal presentations

By 5pm on the last day of finals: Submit short story and final reflection paper (and optional rewrites)